

Thunder & Şimşek

Jayden Ali's architectural installation explores islands and identities for the British Pavilion at the Venice Biennale

20 May to 26 November 2023



Thunder & Şimşek in the portico of the British Pavilion at the Venice Biennale. Photography by Taran Wilkhu.

Looming above the entrance to the British Pavilion at the 2023 Venice Biennale, two large-scale vessels in steel dominate the portico, imposing and celebratory in equal measure. Clamped to the stone columns, the vast, ship-like forms respond to the Pavilion's overarching theme of 'Dancing before the Moon', exploring how diasporic communities employ everyday rituals to shape spaces and define identities, while also acting as a very personal exploration of history and hybridity.

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Titled Thunder & Şimşek (the latter being Turkish for 'lightning'), the architectural-scale installation is artist and architect Jayden Ali's sculptural response to his own hybrid heritage, exploring his ancestral connections to the islands of Trinidad and Cyprus – both of which have been shaped and scarred by the impact of British occupation.

The founding director of JA Projects and one of the Pavilion's four curators (alongside Joseph Henry, Meneesha Kellay and Sumitra Upham), Jayden Ali has used the form, material and positioning of the vessels to consider and reflect upon the nuances, contradictions and complexities of colonialism, diaspora and immigrant identity in Britain.

Embodying multiple references, and responding to numerous points of inspiration, both personal and global, the Thunder & Şimşek sculptures are made from steel, hammered into shape by hand in the workshops of Jamps and HS Design Studio in Greenwich, London.

In their form and metrics, the vessels evoke the confinement and horror of ships used to transport enslaved people, but in their materiality they also embody positive, celebratory references – to the steel pan tradition of Trinidad (the 'thunder') and to the makeshift grill pans that form a cornerstone of Turkish-Cypriot outdoor cooking in diaspora communities, like the one in North London where Jayden Ali's mother grew up and his grandfather still lives. The latter gives the installation the 'Şimşek' of its name, evoking the heat and energy of the sizzling grill around which the family gathered every weekend.



Thunder & Şimşek installed at the entrance to the British Pavilion. Graphic design by Templo.
Photography by Taran Wilkhu.

Despite originating thousands of miles apart, these two distinct 'pan' readings have a clear parallel. Both are barrel-like vessels that act as tools to strengthen communities – upturned and with holes drilled in the side in the case of the Cypriot grill; oil drums scavenged from American military bases, reimagined as carnival instruments in Trinidad. Both items have become the centrepieces of communal rituals that bind together the descendents of these colonised islands in the UK today. Even if – perhaps especially if – like Jayden Ali, they have never actually visited the islands of their heritage.

“At the beginning of the process, it was a bit of a struggle for me because these island nations are not places that I have ever visited. In that context, I thought that perhaps it would be disingenuous to reference them, but then I came to realise that it would actually be honest to who I am, and resonant among the third-generation immigrants that end up in the UK who share the

same sort of hybrid identity. There are so many of us who have an attachment to an inherited culture, but also a sense of disconnection to it as well.”

– Jayden Ali, artist and architect

For Jayden Ali, it is especially important that the steel pan reference goes beyond the superficial, and that the vessels are able to be played, elevating them from purely symbolic into functional ritual objects that transform the trauma of Caribbean history into the sounds of celebratory resistance.



Jayden Ali inspecting one of the pans that comprise Thunder & Şimşek in the workshop in Greenwich. Photography by JA Projects.

Occupying the portico of the pavilion, demanding attention, even partially obscuring the plaque that identifies it as British, the installation emphasises the portico as a space of transition, of departures and arrivals – the ‘ocean’ across which the vessels travel between islands, from Britain to Trinidad and Cyprus and back again.



Installing Thunder & Şimşek without structurally intervening in the pavilion represents a complex feat of architectural engineering. Photography by Taran Wilkhu.

As well as being rich in meaning, Thunder & Şimşek is also a complex feat of architectural engineering. Suspending eight metres and 800kg of sculpture from the portico, without permanently intervening in the fabric of the building is a considerable challenge. Jayden Ali developed a non-intrusive frame that allowed the vessels to be clamped in place using the columns of the façade. In this sense, therefore, each vessel – each element of the hybrid identity – is mutually dependent, both sustained and limited by their relationship with Britain, and, ultimately and inescapably, defined by it.

"It would be easy to read this work as birthed in the context of horror. And to a certain degree it is, but there is also a tone of celebration. An expression of undiluted trauma would do a disservice to what I get from Britain as an institution, and how I am proud to be British. I am what I am. I live in a hybridised culture. I am the subject of it, and I recognise it has given me

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immense privilege, and one of those privileges is to be able to exhibit in Venice.”

– Jayden Ali

For more information and images on Jayden Ali, please contact
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For more information and images on the British Pavilion, please contact
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The British Pavilion is commissioned by the British Council – please credit the British Council in all editorial features.

Notes to editors

Credits

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Jayden Ali

A major talent on Britain's architecture scene today, Jayden Ali is on a mission to transform our cities, their relationship with culture, and the impact they have on the communities that live in and use them. He is the founder of JA Projects, a London-based multidisciplinary architecture and design practice that straddles the gulf between urban strategy and art. In 2020, Architects' Journal named Jayden among its '40 under 40', and since then he has gone from height to height, bringing his expertise to a host of high-profile public projects around London. These include playing a role in the £8 billion Thamesmead Waterfront development, a joint venture between Lendlease and Peabody – the same housing association that provided the home in which Jayden grew up.

As well as running his practice, Jayden also serves as a lecturer on Central Saint Martins' MArch Architecture course, a trustee of Open City/Open House and a member of the London Legacy Development Corporation (LLDC) quality review panel. In April 2022, he was appointed a Mayor's Design Advocate, responsible for guiding London's development strategy.

JA Projects

Founded by architect Jayden Ali, JA Projects is a multidisciplinary practice working at the intersection of architecture, urban strategy, art and performance. Aiming to enrich public spaces and inspire the communities that use them, the practice's recent and ongoing projects include a series of interventions on London's Low Line, a walking route connecting Bankside's historic railway architecture; working with residents to deliver in-fill housing on Southwark's Tustin Estate; contributing to the masterplanning of Old Oak West in Willesden Junction; collaborating on the gallery design and development for V&A East; and working on the £8 billion Thamesmead Waterfront development. Alongside its work on the urban landscape, the studio pursues its interest in the performative and cultural life of cities through the design and curation of experiences and exhibitions, including 2022's Fashioning Masculinities at the V&A. www.ja-projects.com



About the British Pavilion

For media enquiries regarding the British Council's commission for the British Pavilion at the 18th International Art Exhibition - La Biennale di Venezia please contact: venice@britishcouncil.org

Exhibition details

The 18th International Architecture Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia
20 May – 26 November 2023

The British Pavilion is commissioned and managed by British Council Architecture. Commissioner: Sevra Davies, Director of Architecture, Design and Fashion at British Council.

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